

**A Comparison between Heraclitus' *Logos* and Lao-Tzu's *Tao***

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**Introduction**

In this paper I wish to draw a comparison between Heraclitus' notion of *Logos* and Lao-Tzu's notion of *Tao*. Fascinating comparisons between Early Greek and Eastern philosophy have been drawn in the literature<sup>1</sup>. Given that these branches of philosophy arose in very different temporal and special contexts, the legitimacy of such a comparison can indeed be questioned. Several authors have however attempted to support its validity. West's (1971) thesis is explicitly "diffusionist": similarities reflect ideas that Greek thinkers might have borrowed from Eastern philosophy. Kahn (1979) is instead of the opinion that parallels arise from the fact that particular authors, though far away in time and space, might be sufficiently akin to give rise to similar thoughts in similar language. Other theses reported in Kahn are the idea of a sort of "human universality" underlying different cultures and the presence in different contexts of similar social and religious institutions as a basis for resemblance (p. 300).

While these views are not mutually exclusive, and might in principle justify this comparison, caution is needed. Further difficulties are presented by the fact that in the case of both Heraclitus and Lao-Tzu, the texts that reached us are fragmentary

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, West, M. L. (1971), *Early Greek philosophy and the Orient*, Oxford.

and often (maybe intentionally) obscure<sup>2</sup>, thus interpretations diverge widely across the literature. Also, the texts are written in Ancient Greek and Chinese thus imposing a further obstacle to a straightforward interpretation. To avoid the risk of forcing the meaning of the texts beyond the intention of their authors, I will adopt a cautious approach: I will pay as much attention to the similarities as to the differences between the authors; I will work with multiple translations<sup>3</sup> of both Heraclitus' fragments and Lao-Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*; I will engage in a meticulous textual analysis.

At first fascinated by the recurrence of similar images (the river, the opposition of contraries, the bow and others) I have identified a seemingly similar structure in the metaphysical theory of the two authors. I first analyse Heraclitus' *Logos*, then turn to Lao-Tzu's *Tao*, and conclude with a comparison which emphasizes similarities and differences. In both authors I look at 1) the notion of the *Principle* (common name I will use for *Logos* and *Tao*); 2) the contrasting opposites which constitute it; 3) the harmony which underlines it; and 4) the depth which characterizes it. While my analysis will be primarily metaphysical, I will draw connections to the epistemological and ethical claims of both philosophers.

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<sup>2</sup> As noted, for example, by Cooper (2010, p. 579) in relation to Heraclitus.

<sup>3</sup> For Heraclitus:

Kahn, C. H. (1979). *The art and thought of Heraclitus*. Cambridge University Press, English translation  
Diels, H., and Kranz, W. (1934). *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Weidmann, 5th ed., English translation  
by Burnet, John (1920). *Early Greek Philosophy*. London.

For Lao-Tzu:

Addiss, S. & Lombardo, S. (2007), *Lao-Tzu – Tao Te Ching*, Shambhala Boston & London

Lionel Giles (1904), *The Sayings of Lao-Tzu*, Kessinger Publisher LLC

Loy, D. (1999). *Nonduality: a Study In Comparative Philosophy*, pp. 113-125. New York: Humanity Books.

Both authors seem to identify a dual structure of reality made of an inner, fundamental layer, and a superficial, manifest one<sup>4</sup>. I limit my analysis to the fundamental core layer only marginally referring to its superficial manifestations.

## HERACLITUS' *LOGOS*

### *Metaphysics*

#### The notion of *Logos*

The core of Heraclitus' metaphysics<sup>5</sup> is the notion of *Logos*, a sort of independent, mysterious and "divine" (DK 114) natural law which "governs the Universe" (DK<sup>6</sup> 72) and the flow of change in reality<sup>7</sup>. It is difficult (if not impossible) to find an appropriate translation of this key term. Heraclitus himself states in DK 1 that "It is what it is," suggesting that no further definition can be provided. However, several characteristics can be identified.

In early Greek language, the word *logos* meant "what is said," "word," "story". In this sense, *Logos* might simply indicate Heraclitus' account of reality, for

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<sup>4</sup> The characterization of this structure as "dual" unduly simplifies the complex interactions between the two layers in both authors. For present purposes I mean:

1. in Heraclitus, the fundamental layer is the harmony of contraries; the manifest layer is the fire/river;
2. in Lao-Tzu, the fundamental layer is unnamed *Tao*; the manifest layer is named *Tao*.

My choice to focus on the inner, less accessible layer is due to the fact that both authors indicate it is the true, ultimate level of reality:

"The hidden harmony is better than the apparent." (Heraclitus, DK 54)

"The *Tao* which can be expressed in words is not the eternal *Tao*" (Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, ch. 1, L.G.)

<sup>5</sup> As Cooper (2010, p. 579) notes, in Ancient Greek philosophy metaphysics dealt principally with the discerning of the *Archai*, i.e. the basic principles, of reality.

<sup>6</sup> With the notation DK I refer to the Diels-Kranz classification of Heraclitus' fragments.

<sup>7</sup> With "flow of change" I refer to Heraclitus' notion of *pantha rei*, the idea that "everything changes or is in a process of changing" (Cooper, 2010, p. 579). An illustrative fragment is DK 91: "Upon those who step into the same rivers, different and again different waters flow." Also DK 49a and DK 6.

example in DK 1, : “This *Logos* is true evermore.” Fragment DK 50<sup>8</sup> however suggests that, at least in some fragments, *Logos* is something different from Heraclitus' theory.

In Ancient Greek the word *logos* was also often used to indicate “mathematical ratio,” “proportion,” “calculation,” “right reckoning,” “reasonable proportion.” Indeed, as noted by Long (1999, p. 91) and Kahn (p. 22), Heraclitus' *Logos* is related to the notions of measure, proportionality, reasonableness. It is a regular law which, according to Minar (1939, p. 341), could be connected to the Pythagorean ideas of harmony and rhythm.

### Contrasting opposites

*“Graspings: things whole and not whole, what is drawn together and what is drawn apart, the harmonious and the discordant. The one is made up of all things, and all things issue from the one.”*

Heraclitus, DK 10

From a metaphysical perspective Heraclitus describes the *Principle* through a series of oxymoric expressions. A clear example is fragment DK 10<sup>9</sup> where the opposition between the two contrasting sides of the *Principle* is embodied in a sort of “dynamic tension” (Kahn, p. 284) in which one opposite periodically flows into

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<sup>8</sup> DK 50: “Listening not to me, but to the Logos, it is wise to agree that all things are one.” If Logos and Heraclitus' theory were ultimately the same thing, the distinction drawn in DK 50 would make little sense.

<sup>9</sup> Other fragments that display the opposition of contraries are DK 53, 60, 63, 67, 80, 88, 103, 126.

the other. The “positive” side of the *Principle* (“whole,” “harmonious”) is inseparable from the “negative” side (“not whole,” “discordant”)<sup>10</sup> in the same way that the total could not exist without its parts and the parts without their total. This interdependence makes all aspects of reality intertwined with each other. Thus while these sides are opposite to each other, they are nonetheless fundamentally united in virtue of a systematic pattern, a “latent structure” (Long, p. 93) which stands at the basis of the cosmic order of reality.

The opposites are not to be thought as repulsing each other as they often were depicted in Homer or Hesiod, but rather “co-present, interdependent, liable to change into one another, tacitly cooperating” (Long, p. 94). This idea becomes clearer if it is understood that the antithesis, the negative term, assumes a sort of positive role because it “functions as a point of contrast by reference to which the positive contrary is made conceptually definite and distinct” (Kahn, p. 209). As Heraclitus makes clear in the second part of fragment DK 10, the opposites are ultimately and fundamentally a unity which manifests itself in different forms and which, as Heraclitus writes in DK 84, “rests by changing.” This unity helps to breach the “apparently unbridgeable opposition of monism [the identification of a single Principle] and pluralism [the manifestation of multiple things in the world]” (Long, p. 105).

### Underlying harmony

*“Men do not know how what is at variance agrees with itself.*

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<sup>10</sup> It is to be noted that negative is here characterized as “not whole” (descriptive statement of absence of positiveness) rather than “ugly” or “wicked” (moral evaluation in ethical terms).

*It is an attunement of opposite tension (palintropos harmonie),  
like that of the bow and the lyre."*

Heraclitus, DK 51

*"Men do not know that the diverging agrees with itself:  
a structure turning back on itself (palintropos harmonie)  
such as that of the bow or of the lyre."*

Heraclitus, Kahn LXXVIII

The "diverging" forces which form the *Logos* ultimately "agree with each other," i.e. are different manifestations of a single unity, resulting in a harmony (*harmonie*).

The original meaning of the term *palintropos harmonie* as used by Homer and Herodotus is something that joins or fits together. It could be used in a technical sense to indicate a work of carpentry but also in a figurative sense to indicate agreements between hostile men and finally, in a musical sense to indicate the harmonious sound produced when different strings play together (Kahn, p. 196). Interestingly, these three levels of understanding the term *harmonie* correlate with three very different aspects of reality: the material, the human and the artistic. In choosing this particular term Heraclitus seems to suggest that this harmony has a wide range. It is not limited to humankind but extends to the whole of reality. This generalization is further reinforced by the use in the Greek text of the neuter pronoun for "itself" (also used in DK 10 and DK 84).

Also the use of the adjective *palintropos* is relevant to the generalization of *harmonie* to the whole reality. *Palintropos* is an unusual epithet for the term

*harmonie*. Kahn (p. 199) notes that this term contains the same root as the word *tropai* (“turnings”) used in DK 31 with which Heraclitus describes fire, according to Heraclitus, the exterior manifestation of the *Logos*.

The images of the bow and the lyre further reinforce the generalization thesis. The two opposing but connected tensions of the tending and releasing of the bow are unified and find actualization in the flight of the arrow. The tense strings of the lyre mirror the image of the bow, only in tending and releasing them the final harmony can be obtained. The images of the bow and the lyre also seem to contrast and complement each other, “The music of Apollo’s favourite instrument and the death-dealing power of his customary weapon must be taken together as an expression of the joining that characterizes the universal pattern of things.” (Kahn, p. 197)

All in all, it is in the very notion of *palintropos harmonie* that Heraclitus brings together his anthropocentric<sup>11</sup> doctrine of opposites with the notion of cosmic *Logos* (Kahn, p. 200). The unity implied in the *palintropos harmonie* seems to be more fundamental than the opposites in the sense that it underlines them, and yet it could not be such without them since it is a harmony that has to “turn back on itself” (Kahn), is made of “opposite tension” (DK).

### *The bridge to epistemology*

#### Logos' depth

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<sup>11</sup> Kahn sees the doctrine of opposites as anthropocentric in that the opposites are often seen from a “human” perspective; the oppositions in DK 88 (life/death, awake/asleep, young/old) are a clear illustration of this. This idea is questionable if we turn to other fragments such as DK67 (day/night, winter/summer).

*“Traveling on every path, you will not find the boundaries of the soul (psychè) – so deep (bathùs) is its Logos.”*

Heraclitus, DK 45

This principle of *Logos*, a law implying an underlying harmony of contrasting opposites, is described in fragment DK 45 as *bathùs*. Betegh notes that the expression *bathùs logos* refers in ancient Greek to a doctrine “which expresses some important truth but is difficult to communicate” (p. 408). The depth of the *Logos* is interesting especially in its connection with the notion of *psychè*. In this fragment there is a bridge between Heraclitus' metaphysical notion of *Logos* and his epistemological ideas about how (and if) we can know it. The key of this bridge is *psychè*, the human soul. As Wilamowitz (quoted in Kahn, p. 167) notes, Heraclitus is the first to have given “serious thought” to the human soul<sup>12</sup>. In this fragment, *psychè* plays the role of a “principle of rational cognition” (Kahn, p. 127), the human faculty which is able to inquire into the nature of the cosmic *Principle*<sup>13</sup>.

New light is shed on the word *psychè* if it is considered in its association to the word *peirata*. The attribution of “boundaries” to the soul implies that the soul must have extended nature. This extension, an unusual feature of *psychè*, relates it to the cosmic principle. Furthermore, the etymology of the word *peirata* recalls Anaximander's cosmic principle of *àpeiron* (Kahn, p. 127), thus closely tying together human soul with the *Principle* governing reality.

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<sup>12</sup> In Homer for example *psychè* is simply the *flatus vitae*, only mentioned when it leaves the body.

<sup>13</sup> This link between soul and rationality was very unusual for Heraclitus' contemporaries as noted by Betegh, p. 409.

The *Logos* of the soul, thus, is not, and cannot be, fundamentally different from the *Logos* governing the world. There is, as Diels (quoted in Kahn, p. 21) notes, an “identity of structure between the inner, personal world of *psychè* and the larger natural order of the universe.” Thus, “an understanding of the human condition” is “inseparable” from an understanding of “the Universe.” In connection with DK 45, Heraclitus’ fragment DK 101 (“I searched myself”) can be interpreted not as an inward turn of the focus of the philosopher on himself, but rather as a starting point in the epistemological process of understanding the cosmic reality.

A *Logos* so deep cannot be limited to the human soul; the human soul, in turn, can have such a deep *Logos* only if it “travels” to seek a comprehensive experience and understanding of the world (Betegh, p. 411). Betegh (p. 402) notes that DK 45 is the only fragment in which Heraclitus uses the second singular person, directly addressing the reader; this search for understanding the ultimate reality, Heraclitus seems to say, must depart precisely from yourself, from the exploration of your inner soul and of its *Logos*<sup>14</sup>, ultimately the same *Logos* that governs reality.

### *Epistemology*

#### Understanding the *Logos*

Heraclitus writes in DK 2<sup>15</sup> that “*Logos* is common (*xynos*)”. The *Principle* is shared not only by all human beings but also by all living and non-living beings. It is a law by which everything abides, which “suffices for all things” (DK 114).

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<sup>14</sup> A similar idea to the core Orphic principle “Gnothi Seauton” (“Know yourself”).

<sup>15</sup> This concept is also repeated in DK 114.

In DK 113 Heraclitus uses the same adjective *xynos* to describe the faculty of “thinking” (*phronèin*), common “to all (*pasi*)”. The interesting ambiguity of *pasi*, which could mean “to all human beings” but also “to all things,” mirrors and reverses the bridge from metaphysics to epistemology which was drawn in DK 45. *Phronèin* is not only the epistemological process which conveys the *nous* (“understanding,” DK 40) which *all human beings* can potentially aim at but it is also the common metaphysical *Principle* (the *Logos*) shared by all things, i.e. the whole reality.

## LAO-TZU'S TAO

### *Metaphysics*

#### The notion of Tao

*“Tao called Tao is not Tao.*

...

*Nameless: the origin of Heaven and Earth.*

*Naming. The mother of ten thousand things.”*

Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, ch. 1, AL&AS

Lao-Tzu's *Tao* is also a term difficult to translate. Its original literal meaning is “the way,” but Lao-Tzu makes use of it in a more metaphysical sense, as indicating a cosmic principle. In the first chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao-Tzu draws the important distinction between unnamed and named *Tao*. They ultimately amount to the same thing (“same source, but different names,” ch. 1), but the named *Tao* is the external manifestation in the plurality of the world (“thousand things”), while the

unnamed *Tao* is the real, core principle of reality which gave origin to the most basic features of the world (“Heaven and Earth”).

Everything originates from *Tao*; however *Tao* is not a creator God, being entirely “without substance” (Cooper, 2002, p. 81) and often described in negative terms (nameless, ineffable, “something unformed and complete ... solitary and silent” ch. 25). *Tao* is a source and precondition of things but it is not in any way over, above or outside them. *Tao* is the way of reality, it constitutes reality, “pervading all things without limit” (ch. 25).

### Contrasting opposites

*“Is and Isn’t produce each other.*

*Hard depends on easy,*

*Long is tested by short,*

*High is determined by low,*

*Sound is harmonized by voice,*

*After is followed by before.”*



Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Ch. 2, S.A. & S.L.

The symbol of Taoism offers a visual image of the *Principle*, a circle in which black and white flow one into the other. The two contrasting sides are named *yin* (the white, positive, strong, masculine, bright) and *yang* (the black, negative, weak, feminine dark)<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> As in the case of the opposition within the *Logos*, the negative seems here not to be related to a necessarily unfavourable, negative evaluation, but rather to a ‘not-this,’ a descriptive absence.

As noted by Smith, (2011, p. 274), the two sides are in tension but not in clear opposition; rather, they integrate and balance each other reciprocally, “Each invades the hemisphere of the other and ... in the end they’re both defined in the circle which surrounds them.” This is supported by a textual analysis of ch. 2<sup>17</sup> where the pairs of opposites are not simply juxtaposed and contrasted but related to each other through verbs like “depends on” and “determined by”.

Underlying harmony

*“Heaven’s Tao  
Is a stretched bow,  
Pulling down the top,  
Pulling up the bottom.  
If it’s too much, cut.  
If it’s not enough  
Add on to it:  
Heaven’s  
Tao”*

Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Ch. 77, S.A. & S.L.

Kupperman (2007, p. 118) calls this opposition of contraries continuously redefining each other the “dynamic order” of the universe. This dynamic order, illustrated once again in the image of the bow, could at a first reading look like a static image -- there is no shooting of the arrow as in Heraclitus --, but it ultimately

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<sup>17</sup> Other chapters that substantiate this point are 22 and 45.

involves a sort of movement in potency in the tension of the string. The bow is not dead and still but full of energy, in continuous movement within itself: the top and the bottom are pulled down and up at the same time, maintaining the essential balance of the bow itself. Feng (quoted in Loy, p. 345) in fact notes how also the image of the circle in which *yin* and *yang* complement each other is not a static but a dynamic one, "When a thing develops to the highest point it changes to the opposite direction which is decline" and *vice versa*. The fundamentally polar structure of reality, thus, results in a harmony which resides in the dynamic balance of opposites (Cooper, 2002).

***(Impossibility of) epistemology***

Depth of *Tao*

*"Empty of desire, perceive mystery (miao).  
Full of desire, perceive manifestations (chiao).  
These have the same source, but different names.  
Call them both deep (hsuan) –  
Deep and again deep:  
The gateway to all mystery."*

Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Ch. 1, S.A. & S.L.

*"The ancients who followed Tao:  
Dark, wondrous (miao), profound (hsuan), penetrating,  
Deep beyond knowing."*

Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Ch. 15, S.A. & S.L.

Lao-Tzu recognises two layers of reality.

According to a strict etymological reading *miao* can be understood as something “too small to be seen” which “diminishes to the vanishing point” (Boodberg, 1957, p. 611). It is a concept from the sphere of spirituality and holiness and suggests something that is ultimately impossible to know fully.

By contrast *chiao* denotes the world of apparent superficial manifestations. Etymologically it contains the notion of “making bright” and it indicates all what we easily perceive in our everyday life.

Like unnamed and named *Tao*, *miao* and *chiao* are not two fundamentally different concepts but rather two different levels of the same concept. The sameness of *miao* and *chiao* is said to be *hsuan*. Relating this concept to its verbal root “to darken,” Boodberg (p. 617) proposes a translation of *hsuan* as “reaching from the mystery into the deeper mystery.” As Cooper (2002, p. 572) notes, “For anything to exist there must be a profound origin or source that cannot itself be conceived as a thing or a being;” that source is the “bottomless,” “never exhausted” *Tao* (ch. 4). The recurrence of terms like *miao* and *hsuan* in the description of *Tao* suggests that indeed its true nature is deep “beyond knowing”. The depth of *Tao* prevents any human being from attaining ultimate knowledge of it.

Loy (p. 122) suggests that the unattainability of this knowledge might come from the fact that it is impossible for human beings to observe reality objectively, from the outside. We live in the world and thus cannot fully grasp it. Left with no possibility of investigating the real nature of reality, the sage has only one option left: if he cannot understand the *Tao* he should do nothing else but follow it. The impossibility of a proper epistemology has ethical implications.

*The bridge to ethics*

Following the *Tao*

*“Better to be like water  
which ... does not contend.*

*It pools where humans disdain to dwell,*

*Close to the *Tao*.”*

Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Ch. 8, S.A. & S.L.

The idea of a harmonious dynamic order unifies the two contrasting opposites. In fact, as Loy (p. 374) notes, the distinctions between such opposites might even be merely logical, only present in our mind and language. If we understand this we can transcend them, reach the ultimate harmony and eventually “be like water.” Lao-Tzu’s concept of harmony is not simply a description of the nature of reality but also a prescription of how the sage, indeed everyone, should behave. Grasping the intrinsic harmony of the world and abandoning oneself to it are, for the sage, one and the same thing. To follow the *Tao* is “never actively to go against the rhythms of the world,” i.e., it is to adapt oneself to the natural course of reality, to abandon oneself to its flow<sup>18</sup>.

The way assumes a three-layered meaning: it is the way of the ultimate, underlying reality (unnamed *Tao*), the way of the universe as we perceive it (named

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<sup>18</sup> This idea of abandonment to the flow of reality Lao-Tzu calls *wu wei*, a spontaneous and effortless, non-assertive approach to life. Cooper (2002, p. 83) comments, “The manner of our action should be submissive, weak, feminine, yealding. [...] The water is a symbol of the way itself ... water influences without dominating, it is the source and ustainer of life, but does not interfere with it.”

*Tao*), and the way every human being should live (Smith, p. 253).

According to Lao-Tzu it is in the notion of harmony that the bridge between metaphysics and, this time, ethics (rather than epistemology), is to be found. We human beings should be this harmony rather than try to understand it. And in fact many of the chapters Lao-Tzu's text have a normative rather than a descriptive tone. The main message Lao-Tzu wants to convey is not a rational descriptive explanation of the *Principle* of reality but rather a prescriptive rule that every single person, if a sage, should abide by: "Live in accordance to the *Tao*"(ch. 55).

## **Conclusion**

### ***Comparing Logos and Tao***

The notions of *Logos* and *Tao* display several similarities.

According to both Heraclitus and Lao-Tzu, the fundamental *Principle* of Reality is constituted by a set of dynamic oppositions which do not combat but rather define and complement each other giving birth to an underlying balanced harmony, the real core of the universal order. The harmony seems to be more fundamental than the opposites but at the same time it seems to depend on them and cannot transcend them. This harmony is fundamentally mysterious. The world is composed of two layers, a deep one and a superficial one and ordinary people grasp only one layer, the superficial one. But it is the deep layer which constitutes the real, fundamental, core reality.

Here is where the main difference between the two authors can be identified.

For Heraclitus, the task of the sage is to investigate the nature of this deeper layer. His is an intellectual philosophy, the ultimate focus of which is understanding

how the world works. There is indeed a way to grasp, albeit not fully, the ultimate nature of the *Logos*: looking at one's own *Logos*, that of the individual soul, and understanding that, in virtue of its depth, it cannot be fundamentally different from the "common" *Logos* which governs reality. The investigation of the depth of the individual soul is the bridge between metaphysics and epistemology, between the existence of the *palintropos harmonie* and the understanding of it.

For Lao-Tzu, on the other hand, the sage is one who abides by *Tao*, the way, the natural order of the world, without striving to reach an understanding of it, which is ultimately unattainable. His is an practical philosophy, "a knowing how rather than knowing that" (Kupperman, 2007, p. 117). Understanding the way which governs the world and behaving according to it are one single action. The concept of harmony is the bridge between metaphysics and ethics; once one has realised the harmonious relations which govern the world, one will abide by it if one is a sage.

The choices of the particular words *Logos* and *Tao* to indicate the *Principle* are no coincidence, these particular words had precise etymological implications and were connected, in the minds of their contemporaries, to use in specific contexts. *Logos* is a word which has to do with the mind, with the power of understanding, with the notion of measure. *Tao*, instead, indicates "the way," a path, a route, a mode of behaviour.

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One final note: I would like to emphasize that the analysis and comparison in which I have engaged in this essay are parts of an attempt to identify key similarities and differences between two very distant authors while trying to stay as close as possible to the original text.

Given the fragmentary and obscure nature of the primary sources, a degree of discretion in interpretation is necessary if one wants to draw any meaningful conclusion. The beauty and fascination of both texts however lies primarily, in my opinion, in their “linguistic density,” i.e. a “meaningful ambiguity” which involves “lexical and syntactic indeterminacy as a device for saying several things at once” (Kahn, p. 92). The “hermeneutical generosity” of both texts thus leaves us with questions that can never fully be answered. And while this could make the interpretative work at times hard or frustrating, it undoubtedly enriches its depth, making it all the more absorbing and intriguing.

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